

ELVEHJEM ARTS CENTER



Fig. 1. The Elvehjem Arts Center, from the east 1971. [series 9/2, Elvehjem Art Center, jf-86]

Planned and championed for thirty years by Professor James Watrous, the Elvehjem was built in 1968 to house the permanent and travelling art of the University. It is also home to the University's art department. At the behest of the Brittingham foundation, which made the original \$1 million grant, the art center is open to the public at no charge.

The first start of an art museum at the University came in 1876, when the fourth floor of the old science hall was dedicated to the University art collection. The art works displayed in this space constituted the entire art collection until 1884 when science hall burned to the ground with the loss of all art. After the fire a pattern appeared that would persist for almost a century, the university would encourage and accept donations of art works, lament the lack of display facilities, and consign the art to random and scattered campus locations or long term storage. Remarkably, even though this pattern of acceptance and neglect was widely known, the University continued to accumulate significant art works. These included the Reinsch collection of European masters donated by Charles Crane and William Brumder in 1912, and hung in physical education rooms in Lathrop Hall. By 1937 only 48 of the 67 works in this collection could be found, and many of them were in "deplorable condition." The situation did materially improve for decades. Professor James Watrous took over unofficial stewardship of the University collection in 1939 as a new instructor in the department of Art

History. Watrous found dozens of significant works of art stored without any care in a unventilated concrete room in the basement of Bascom Hall. The art was inconveniently available to art students, and not at all to the general public. Watrous began a thirty year campaign to obtain a facility suitable to the stature of the University's collection. For 15 years there was neither support nor progress. A temporary display facility opened in Memorial Library for a few years, and storage racks were installed in the Bascom store room. During this period the University continued to accept significant donations of art and consign them straight to storage.¹

At the regents board meeting, at which president E. B. Fred was replaced by Conrad Elvehjem in February 1958, Fred said: "In my judgement there is no other building which could be given by private generosity that would more enhance the cultural influence of the University than an art center and gallery." At new president Elvehjem's first Administrative Committee meeting, he requested a priority list of projects which could be funded by gifts. The result of this campus wide poll was that an art center and gallery was at the top of the priority list. Four years without progress, but with many more art donations, followed this poll. It was clear that with the burden of providing more and more instructional buildings, the state would not be able or willing to fund an art museum. The money would have to come from donations. The outlook did not look promising. An early attempt at a museum design was executed in 1958 by Watrous and Leo Jakobsen. According to Watrous it was strictly a fund-raising device. It consisted of a series of hexagonal rooms in a honeycomb layout. Its cost was estimated at \$1 million and was intended to be placed on the lower campus.²

Then in May 1962, at the urging of president Elvehjem and E. B. Fred, the Brittingham family foundation donated one million dollars toward the construction of art galleries to be open to the public free of charge at all times. Two months later on July 24, 1962, president Elvehjem was struck with a fatal heart attack at work in his Bascom Hall office. He was succeeded by Fred Harvey Harrington who recommended at his first meeting with the regents in September 1962 that the art center be a memorial to Elvehjem.

The University community was galvanized into action by the Brittingham donation. Watrous had been given a preliminary estimate of \$3.3 million from Dean Wendt of the University planning commission. It was decided that the center should be located as part of the lower campus development, then in the planning stages. In November a faculty planning committee was appointed by president Harrington. Architect Harry Weese of Chicago was selected to design the lower campus structures. The decision was made, in agreement with the Brittingham family, to incorporate the art galleries and the art center into a single building.⁴

1963 saw a continuation of this high level of activity. In February 1963 the Wisconsin Foundation, a channel for private donations to the University, undertook to raise the \$2.5 million needed for the arts center. The first stage of the Wisconsin Foundation's fund-raiser in 1963 was to solicit large donations. The search for large donations was successful. \$300,000 was donated by the Kohler Company and Trust to fund the art library. \$175,000 was received for the large auditorium from L. E. Phillips; the Oscar Meyer Company contributed \$100,000; an anonymous \$75,000 gift for the sculpture garden. \$75,000 was donated by friend and colleagues of Winifred and Del Page, art patrons who were killed in a plane crash in Atlanta in June 1962.⁵

By October 1963 the Wisconsin Alumni Magazine reported that the Elvehjem fund had surpassed the \$2 million mark. But the fund-raising effort began to stall, and doubts were raised that the job could be accomplished. A strong show of support by the faculty in a fund raiser helped. Then in July 1964 with the help of a brief from Dr. Watrous and the strong support of president Harrington, a \$400,000 grant was obtained from WARF. This large gift rejuvenated the campaign.⁶

The architect and the planning committee worked on the design of the building through 1964. Their sixth plan was developed and given preliminary approval by the regents in October 1964. At

this time the regents were told that \$3.05 million had been raised by the foundation. The Elvehjem project was presented as an integral part of the lower campus development. Completion for the Elvehjem was now estimated as August 1967.⁷

When ground-breaking was scheduled for October 23, 1965, the fund-raiser was still \$73,000 short of its goal. The official ground-breaking ceremony took place as scheduled, the same day (October 23, 1965) as ground-breaking for the Alumni House on the shore of lake Mendota, though no building contracts had yet been awarded. In March 1966, the regents were told that the bids for the lower campus project were almost \$2 million over estimates. By May 1966, the state had allocated an extra \$400,000, and some cuts were made on the Humanities building, and authority to let contracts was granted.⁸

Building contracts were let by the regent's executive committee on May 6, 1966. The general contract went to Corbetta Construction Company of Des Plaines, Illinois for \$7.78 million. Total contract amounts were \$13.7 million. Sources of funds were the state \$10.3 million, gifts and grants \$3.1 million. Construction work on the Elvehjem began in spring 1967; by August the building was emerging from the ground.⁹

In May 1967 the art history department selected a director for the museum. The choice fell on Millard Rogers the former curator of the Toledo Museum of art. In July of 1967 the art center became a separate administrative unit in the University. Construction progressed to the point of installing the roof in July 1968. A series of labor strikes, material shortages, and the priority given to the Humanities building combined to delay construction of the Elvehjem seriously through late 1968 and early 1969. Opening dates were constantly pushed back, first to November 1968; then January 1969 and May 1969. The Humanities building was finished and accepted in late October 1967. After a few more short delays over fire codes and furnishings, Rogers and his staff began to move art work and books into the museum in the summer of 1970.¹⁰

The grand opening of the Elvehjem art center was held on September 12, 1970. Master of ceremonies Robert Rennebohm (of the Wisconsin Foundation) observed "this whole thing really started with Jim Watrous in the basement of Bascom Hall in 1939."¹² The grand opening was a glorious success, 400 people turned out in formal dress to see the new building, and the 185 works of art selected from the permanent collection, and borrowed especially for the occasion. The library was so sparsely filled that Watrous remembers that they were afraid that a representative from the Kohler foundation would come and see the paltry library. Notable guests included governor Warren Knowles, dairyman W. D. Hoard, Irwin Mayer of the State Journal, Dr. Watrous, Mrs. Harry Steenbock, and Mrs. Conrad Elvehjem. The general public was invited to the public opening the following day.¹¹

The building is 195 by 122 foot rectangle of steel and concrete. There are six floors: the lowest level holds four auditoria, classrooms, storage and conference rooms. The second, ground level floor, is taken up by the Kohler art library; the third floor is dominated by the sculpture court, which is open clear to the skylights on the roof, offices and galleries surround the central sculpture court. More galleries are arranged around the open court on the fourth and fifth floors. A partial sixth floor hold the mechanical equipment for the building. The ground was judged to be too swampy to build a full basement. The building is sheathed with Wisconsin lannon stone, with copper roof and trim. Most of the roof is skylights over the central area and the lower gallery wings.

Because the demolition of the University Club to the north, which was intended to provide expansion room for the museum, has not happened, new plans are currently being developed for expansion. Storage space is a particular problem since donations increased sharply after the museum was opened. Gallery space is also limited. One plan would build underground to the north, another would move the Kohler library, freeing up considerable space in the building.¹²

The Elvehjem has met its highest expectations for 25 years. The constant stream of travelling

exhibits, special events, and the rotating displays of the permanent collection make it a magnet not only for the University community but the for residents of the city of Madison and the state of Wisconsin. The Elvehjem regularly receives honors and grants from the federal Institute of Museum Services, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Director Rogers left shortly after the job of organizing and opening was finished. The current director is Russell Panczenko.

- 1) Watrous, James, *A Century of Capricious Collecting*, 1987
- 2) *Regent's Minutes*, February 1, 1958; *Daily Cardinal*, February 25, 1958; Plans and explanations of the honeycomb design are in series 4/0/3 box 178. Text of remarks by James Watrous, February 24, 1963, Archives Elvehjem subject file.
- 3) *Regent's Minutes*, May 4, 1962, September 14, 1962; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June 1962; Fund-raising pamphlet, series 4/0/3 box 178; Proposal for the Financing and construction of the Elvehjem Art Center, September 1962, series 4/0/3 box 179.
- 4) Harrington to Fred et al, November 30, 1962, Watrous memo: Art Galleries and Art Center Group tentative estimates, June 20, 1962, series 4/0/3 box 179; Elvehjem Art Center newsletter, February-march 1963, series 4/0/3 box 178; enclosure #1 in Archives Elvehjem subject file.
- 5) R. C. Zimmerman to Harrington, February 4, 1963, Elvehjem Art Center newsletter, January 1963, October-November 1963, series 4/0/3 box 178;
- 6) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, October 1963; *Capital Times*, February 25, 1963, May 29, 1963; E. B. Fred to faculty, February 25, 1963, series 4/0/3 box 178; Ingraham to faculty May 21, 1963. Archives Elvehjem subject file;
- 7) *Regent's Minutes*, October 16, 1964; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1964 p. 4; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 17, 1964;
- 8) *Daily Cardinal*, September 22, 1965, October 20, 1965, October 22, 1965.
- 9) *Regent's Minutes*, March 4, 1966, April 1, 1966, May 6, 1966; Elvehjem Art Center newsletter, First semester 1967-1968, second semester, 1967-1968, series 40/1/7-1 box 32;
- 10) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, October 1967 p. 14; *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 27, 1968; Elvehjem Art Center newsletter, First semester 1968-1969, 40/1/1-1 box 37.
- 11) *Daily Cardinal*, March 25, 1970; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, October 1970 p. 12; Elvehjem Art Center newsletter second semester 1969-1970, series, 40/1/8-1 box 9; Dedication pamphlet for the Elvehjem Art Center, September 12, 1970, series 40/1/2-1 box 32.
- 12) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, October 1972, p. 4; *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 19, 1994; Interview with Dr. James Watrous, summer 1994.